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ABSTRACT

Degree completion programs on military installations are large, effective programs, with substantial support. Education will never be more convenient or less expensive for students. Education is a product military personnel need and want. In a time of declining tuition assistance, it is up to colleges that deal with the military to market their programs to military officers and personnel, rather than just "offer" programs. All educators need to be positive about still-available tuition assistance, rather than negative about limitations and budget cuts. Colleges should promote degree completion programs as the opportunity of a lifetime. A good marketing and public relations plan should be drawn up. It should contain at least the following elements: (1) an identification and assessment of the publics that constitute target groups or market segments for the program; (2) an identification of the most effective "senders" and "channels" for each target group; (3) an identification of what specific messages are needed for each market segment; and (4) a marketing plan, or at least a calendar for a year-round public relations program. College personnel who do not have skills in marketing can hire professionals to do it, engage marketing professors and classes in the effort, or take marketing courses and learn to market their programs. (KC)

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DOING MORE WITH LESS:
MARKETING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN TIMES OF DECLINING TUITION ASSISTANCE

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Doing More with Less:
Marketing Educational Programs in Times of Declining Tuition Assistance

(Paper originally presented at the NUCEA conference at Salt Lake City, Utah on April 18, 1989.)

By Donald J. Breckon
President, Park College

Introduction

"These are the best of times and the worst of times." So said Charles Dickens in his masterpiece, *A Tale of Two Cities*. "These are the times that try men's souls," someone else said. While both these statements were undoubtedly true of the era in which they were first written, I believe they are very descriptive of college degree completion programs the last couple of years, especially on military installations.

There is a lot of hand wringing, head shaking and other pessimistic behavior currently occurring among educators in the military. However, enrollment at many sites is at all time highs, and is growing. Tuition assistance and other forms of financial aid have been appropriated in large amounts. Many old educational facilities have been replaced or renovated. There is support for education among colonels and generals, many of whom were educated in such a program on a site.

Degree completion programs are available at nearly all sites. A handful of colleges have demonstrated a willingness to package education in formats that meet the needs of student military personnel. Quality assurance mechanisms are in place both on the sites and in the colleges. The specter of diploma mills has been avoided.

We who are in education at military installations have done a good job. We have fine programs, good curricula, good faculty, good students, good facilities, and good funding. "These are the best of times." Yet we find ourselves in the midst of a great deal of pessimism. We have had limitations placed on tuition assistance (TA) and more are rumored. Some sites ran out of TA, while others simply have tight budgets. We have been forced to make tough decisions in implementing the "cost effective" clause.

"Push has come to shove" at some sites. Colleges that have served the military well for many years (like Park) have had large and successful degree completion programs decimated by a decision to assign all lower division courses to an area community college. Some **colleges have withdrawn from military sites** entirely, because of difficulty of meeting revenue projections, the near impossibility of increasing tuition, and the increasing state and federal regulations.

Other colleges are contemplating such a move. It will become increasingly difficult to have good colleges serve military installations. How long colleges will subsidize such operations remains to be seen. What is particularly troublesome, some education services officers refuse to allow colleges to promote classes to area Guard and Reserves, let alone civilians.

In the long range, it is **counterproductive to force a college to run a class that is half full**, when it could be filled, at no extra cost. This and other conditions lead college presidents to say, "These are the worst of times, and we're getting out." Will funding get better or worse? Who do you believe? Can we use our scarce resources more wisely? "These are the best of times. These are the worst of times." "These are the times that try (our) souls."

A Perspective

It is easy to complain, blame and criticize. (As a college president, I assume every decision I make will be unpopular with between 10 and 50 percent of the people, most of whom don't begin to understand the issues.) However, I also assume that their ignorance is partially my fault, for not fully communicating with them.

I often use the illustration of a **pointing finger**. Notice that there are three fingers pointing back at the person pointing. It's far more productive to look at yourself when placing blame, than to blame or criticize or complain. Returning to the financial problems of the military education system, the question should be, what can I do to help? What can we do that helps? That kind of attitude makes you part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

Before proceeding further, I would like to say that despite what I've said, it is not as bad as we think. Tuition assistance programs have generally been increasing in recent years, in terms of real dollars. College costs have been inflating, and despite cost containment activities, most **colleges have had to raise tuition**. As an illustration, nationwide, tuition increased in four-year institutions, 7 percent in 1986-87, and 7 percent in 1987-88, for a total of 14 percent. (Park College did not raise its tuition and fees in 1986-87 or 1987-88. It did raise its tuition 8.5 percent in 1988-89 to cover the cost of upgraded computer labs, office automation and conversion of the library to electronic automation.)

Tuition generally has been reimbursed at military sites in a 75-25 percent split during the last decade, with the student paying the smaller amount. Some groups have enjoyed a 90-10 percent split, while a few groups have struggled with a 60-40 percent split, and still others a 50-50 split.

Military education personnel have strategized to balance their tight budgets by limiting eligibility for TA. Enlisted and warrant officers are limited, as are second academic majors, or second lateral degrees.

A second strategy used to balance their budget is to require that other sources of funding be used before TA is utilized. Using another strategy, the "cost effective" provision required that reimbursement be at 75 percent of the lowest available tuition rate for that course. Yet another strategy has been to limit the amount of TA that can be drawn, placing a ceiling on the number of courses and/or the number of TA dollars that can be reimbursed per year.

While none of us in education like such cuts, the question that arises is "so what?" Instead of pointing at others, some self-examination is in order regarding "what does all this mean for me?"

Military site educational programs have been offering financial aid that far exceeds that on college campuses

throughout the world. What college campus offers 75 percent reimbursement for all comers? What college campus offers degree completion programs in timeframes and locations convenient to the student? What college campus offers a full range of student support services to adult part time students, with few, if any, lines to wait in, and few bureaucratic snafus? Students on the sites have specially designed programs, superior student support services, with more convenient delivery systems at far less individual expense than they can get on nearly any campus in the world. However, they don't know it and don't appreciate it. Whose fault is that? Ours! **A college degree will never be more convenient or less expensive.** We need to tell students and potential students that fact, over and over again.

Perhaps we have become accustomed to students flocking to us, and to other luxuries of this "golden age of military degree completion programs." Perhaps we fear the future too much. Perhaps we are clutching the present so tightly to our chest that our arms are too full to embrace the future. Perhaps tight budgets and limited TA is not as good as we would like it. But a "worst case" for military education is still a far better buy than can be received elsewhere.

We may have entered a **new era** for education on military installations. If this is so, it is not profitable to point fingers at others. It is, however, profitable to examine ourselves, and our attitudes. Are we part of the problem or part of the solution? How do you see it? To use an analogy, "Is the glass half full or is it half empty?" Your answer does not change what is in the glass, but it does change your attitude toward it.

Another Perspective

Education has always been expensive. People who have become educated have usually made enormous sacrifices, of time, energy and fiscal resources. Education is expensive, but **so is ignorance.** Education is a good investment.

A recent study done by Economics Professor Finis Welch at U.C.L.A. (and reported in the *Kansas City Times*, September 5, 1988) indicated that the difference between a college degree and a high school diploma is now about $600,000 in income over a working lifetime. Another study conducted by the College Board and reported in the August 17, 1988 *Wall Street Journal* determined that in 1986 male college graduates earn 39.2 percent more than high school graduates, while female college graduates earn 40.5 percent more than high school graduates. They also report research that indicates that the college educated are also less likely to be unempoyed than high school graduates. "People want it and they are willing to pay for it." They conclude by noting that "college enrollment has held steady, in fact of a 16 percent decline in the number of high school graduates since 1977." Adults are coming to college in record numbers, and most are paying tuition and fees themselves.

Historically, during times of recession the number of students in college increases. When **unemployment is high, enrollment in colleges and universities is high.** When people's job stability or financial stability is threatened, people reassess their future prospects, and often seek to improve them. They do this with little or no nudging from college recruiters. However, the most important point is that they find ways to pay for it. They use state and federal financial aid to the extent that it is available. They use savings if available. They have a working spouse or get a second job if it is possible. They borrow from banks (Guaranteed Student Loans, etc.) if possible. They sell second cars, boats, vacation property, etc. They forego vacations and minimize travel. They borrow from parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. They incur substantial amounts of debt on credit cards.

Such students establish a goal of a college degree and then subordinate nearly all else to that process. They do so willingly and joyfully. They find that not only is the end result worth sacrificing for, but the process of obtaining a degree itself has many personal satisfactions built into it. The sense of achievement, of doing something worthwhile, of preparing for and shaping one's future, the sense of self-fulfillment, the excitement of learning, the new friends, good contacts and socialization are all benefits of degree completion programs. It is hard to put a price tag on these benefits, or on the financial benefits of a college degree. But these elements are among the reasons why many students are willing to sacrifice much time, energy and dollars to attain a degree. Students who have graduated know this, but do potential students? If not, why not?

In the past, students have flocked to our programs to get "free, or almost free" education. We now may have to sell education to military personnel. History is on our side. During times of tight budgets and economic instability, people return to college in **larger numbers** than ever. (Note that we have pointed the finger of blame at tight budgets and those that control them, but that three fingers are pointed back at us. Re-examining our roles will be more profitable than pointing fingers of blame or even "hand wringing.")

We need to change with the changing times — all of us. We now need to market education. Fortunately, we have a very marketable product. Experience has shown that people will flock to our doors in greater numbers if we market our product in the right way. As noted earlier, the number of 18-year-olds has been declining in recent years, yet enrollment on college campus has consistently increased. The reason is marketing. Colleges have taken seriously the challenge of marketing, and record enrollment is the result instead of anticipated declines.

I believe that what is needed on military installations is someone marketing the value of a college degree, more so than marketing a particular college. Perhaps together, we can find ways to do this.

Publicizing and Marketing Higher Education

Time does not permit a detailed discussion of marketing, but a quick review of basic principles is in order. College personnel, military educational counselors, education service officers and others all have opportunity to use these principles. A good public relations plan should include at least the following elements:

1. **An identification and assessment of the "publics that constitute target groups or market segments for the program.** Note the intentional use of plurals in "publics," "target groups" and "market segments." Examples might include newly enlisted personnel, those eligible for promotion, those considering reenlistment, those considering leaving the military after a term or two, those

career NCOs and officers preparing for civilian roles, and those in reserve units. These groups are among the market segments and should receive group-specific messages. Promotional material focused on each group will be more productive than an announcement of available courses and a degree completion program designed in a "one size fits all."

2. **An identification of the most effective "senders" and "channels" for each target group.** There is a great disparity in the credibility of communicators or senders among groups. Generally, senders need to be credible to a group before the message is sent to them. Who will the target group listen to and respect? That should be the focus of discussion and brainstorming for those responsible for marketing. Messages can be fed into a variety of channels...print media, electronic media, direct mail, bulletin boards, group sessions, individual sessions. Serious discussion needs to be directed toward which senders and channels are likely to be most effective for each of the target groups identified above. Will it be the ESO, the Education Counselor, Commanders, current students, successful former students, former military students who are now successful in civilian life, spouses of current and former students, faculty, or varying combinations of them all? The answer, of course, is that it varies with the target group.

3. **An identification of what specific messages are needed for each market segment.** The message has to create awareness, interest, and trial, and should be tailor made to the needs and interests of each target group or market segment. Some messages should simply make people aware of the educational programs. Some messages are more personalized and should create an active interest in education. Some messages should be focused on eliciting trial — "Take a course, you'll be glad you did." Focusing on concerns such as educational requirements for promotion, or preparation for transition to civilian life, or the economic advantages of a degree, or the self-concept improvement are but some of many messages that should be sent to some of the target groups. Anticipated barriers or elements of resistance should be addressed in some of the messages. Addition of a "selling" mentality may now be needed, instead of "merely serving potential students who come through the door" mentality.

4. **A Marketing Plan, or at least a calendar for a year-round Public Relations Program.** Such a calendar helps assure that each of the market segments are addressed during the year. Be sure to plan some repetition. Audiences like a parade, constantly passing by. One message will not reach everyone, and will not be remembered by all it reaches.

All who are concerned about promoting education at military sites should think about what market segments should be addressed, and what methods, messages, and materials should be used. A "shotgun" type approach of "one announcement for everyone" is woefully inadequate. A "rifle" approach of picking specific targets and focusing on them sequentially is always the more effective route. Again, I pose the question, "Is the finger of blame for limited enrollment pointing at the budget or at potential students who don't care about education, or are there three fingers pointing back at us for inadequately marketing education.

Pragmatic Considerations

ESOs, counselors, college personnel and others may not have skills or training in marketing. However, at least three options are open.

First, contracts with marketing/public relations firms can be negotiated, to either do the marketing or to consult with educational personnel who will do it. I know budgets are tight, but it may be the best money spent. Advertising doesn't cost, it pays. When business is bad, more advertising is needed, not less. Ways must be found to increase class size so that more can be served with less. Economies of scale must be used, to prevent further erosion of programs.

Secondly, students and faculty in marketing classes on the site may be willing to design a marketing plan for the site. This approach combines expertise in marketing with the views of satisfied customers. Satisfied students are your best salespersons.

Third, education personnel can learn marketing theory and practice. Marketing books and seminars are available, probably as courses in the program you are trying to promote. Perhaps taking a marketing course would be the single most important thing you could do because it would provide expertise, it would allow time (in class) to think about how marketing principles apply to your situation, and it would put you back in touch with students in a classroom. (While we are busy ourselves with paperwork and programs, we need to constantly be reminded that our primary reason for existence is to serve students.)

Professional marketers may indicate that this is no arena for amateurs, and if budget permits, professional assistance would be useful. However, slick advertising campaigns are not required. Simply having the right people give the right messages to the right market segments at the right time need not be difficut. Moreover, at most sites, anything done along these lines of marketing would be a substantial improvement. Also, poorly done marketing would not reduce enrollment. Education is a saleable product. **Marketing can only help.**

Conclusion

I have attempted to establish in this paper that degree completion programs on military installations are large, effective programs, with substantial amounts of financial support. Education will never be more convenient or less expensive. Education is a product military personnel **need and want.**

We need to accept responsibility for making the connection between what we offer and what military personnel need. Everyone in this room needs to accept responsibility for "marketing" rather than "offering" educational programs. Each one of us needs to be positive about still available tuition assistance, rather than negative about limitations and budget cuts. We need to examine our own attitudes first, and develop strategies to either improve or compensate for "real world" factors. First and foremost, we need to accept responsibility for our opportunities. We need to be proactive. We need to promote degree completion programs at military sites as the **opportunity of a lifetime.**

Finally, let me conclude by reminding you that there are three kinds of people: those that make things happen, those that watch things happen, and those that wonder what happened.

I trust that your participation in this conference will reaffirm your commitment to making more good things happen in educational programs on your installation.